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ABSTRACT

The "Blue Tube" is a 2-part academic package developed at the U.S. Air Force Academy consisting of an English course in communication and writing skills and a management course in advertising and marketing; the two courses are interrelated through student assignments in television production. The first part of the package includes training of English students in television production, followed by instruction in writing and scripting. In the other part, management students apply marketing and advertising concepts to produce and evaluate television commercial messages. The Blue Tube has made a vital contribution by increasing student interest and success in communication and management instruction at the academy. (CMV)

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THE BLUE TUBE

by

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and

Bob Taylor

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THE BLUE TUBE

BY

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United States Air Force Academy

We two have combined the disciplines of communication and marketing to create an academic package informally known as the Blue Tube. The college catalog here at the Air Force Academy recognizes that package as two courses: English 330 Honors and Management 475, Distribution Management. Together they produce one of the most stimulating academic experiences to be found anywhere.

Strangely enough, it all started in a hardware store. Among the wrenches and hammers, an English professor and a professor of Management bumped into one another and began talking shop. The English professor was bragging to his colleague about a new honors course he had recently wrestled from a hard-nosed Academy curriculum committee. This was English 330H. Perhaps the best way to begin our discussion would be a similar description of that course.

At the Air Force Academy, all juniors (called Second Classmen) must take either an advanced composition course or a technical writing course, depending on their academic major. However, in an experiment, Colonel Wallisch got the idea that both technical writing and advanced composition could be taught within a "context." He was supported in that idea by his colleagues at the University of Michigan, School of Engineering, J. C. Mathis and Dwight W. Stevenson. They,

along with Wallisch, specifically felt that technical writing is best taught under some kind of real-life situation.

Since Wallisch had a communications background, he chose television as the context. Therefore, English 330H students would be selected from the junior class pool, would be students with high English grades and high academic averages, and would be put into the honors course instead of the traditional composition or technical writing track. But their classroom would be a non-traditional one--a television studio.

When these honors students report for the first day of class, they are given a tour of the Academy's extensive television facilities. They are briefed on every position--from director to camera person--and, at the end of that hour, they fill out a sheet indicating the technical position they would like to hold during the semester. That evening the English 330H staff sifts through those choices and divides the class in half.

For the first half of the semester, ten of the 20-person class will perform techical functions and receive their training from noncommissioned officers who are fully trained armed forces radio and television specialists. These professionals teach the cadets their technical duties and responsibilities, and, before long, the students are able to run the entire studio--every position--by themselves.

The other half goes to a conference room across from the studio where the English teacher teaches them writing and scripting. This is the writing staff. They are the reporters who go out into the Air Force Academy and dig up news, features, and sports items for the Blue Tube.

Somehow all of this comes together and twice weekly over the Academy's 1,200-set closed-circuit television system viewers are treated to the 7-minute production known as the Blue Tube. In the academic building, most every classroom has a television set. Blue Tube is shown between classes, so every student and teacher has seven chances to see that program on a show day. Residents of the housing area see the program during the evening hours.

In terms of communications skills, students learn how to script an entire news and feature program and aim it at a specific audience. They also learn the mechanics of presenting those words over the medium of television. This can be a management experience in itself, for the entire television production staff must work together in order to make that program. At the midsemester point, the writing staff becomes the technical staff, and the technical staff lays down its tools to learn the duties of reporter and writer. So the whole class is exposed to the entire experience.

The noncommissioned officer technical staff provides another additional dimension. Remember, these students are destined to become officers in the U.S. Air Force. Thus, the course places them together with these highly professional noncommissioned officers in a rather pressurized environment. They learn valuable skills from the sergeants and soon gain a firm appreciation of their skills. The pressure of putting out the program is not unlike that of performing an Air Force operation, with NCO's and officers working together toward a common goal. Thus, there is an extra "real world" benefit on the technical track.

But there is more by way of written communication besides writing the script. The technical students must not miss out on their exposure to technical writing. Thus, two technical papers are required to satisfy the course--beyond scripting, taping, and putting the program together. The first report is a description of a mechanism which follows strict technical reporting format. In this paper, the cadet describes some piece of technical equipment found in the studio or in the master control room. Subjects range from the television camera itself to the mechanism under the audio turntable. Visuals must be included. The other paper is a formal technical report, but this deals with some facet of the mass media. Subjects here range from honesty in advertising to Columbus, Ohio's QUBE television system.

And this rather exciting, total communications environment was the subject of the English professor's hardware store speech to his Management colleague. As a matter of fact, he was bragging to the Management professor about this English course's fabulous management training beyond its aim to teach written and spoken communication. The Management professor was impressed, but then he said: "Yeah, but you don't have any commercials. How can you have a television program without any commercials?"

Thus, Lt Colonel Bob Taylor conceived the notion for Management 475 and its implications for Blue Tube. If you watch Blue Tube today, you will see that each program does, in fact, contain a colorful commercial dealing in a public service way with some aspect of the Academy's many services to cadets and faculty. A commercial may deal with the Cadet Flower Shop, the Ceramics Hobby Shop, Black Heritage Week, the snack bar in the student union, or a special evening offered by the Chaplain. They are fast paced and very much

tuned to the audience.

A "hands on" experience in distribution management (marketing) is a difficult task. The Blue Tube provides an exciting challenge. Marketing ideas or products in terms of product, price, promotion, and place is interesting text book reading. But, applying these techniques is another matter--and, an opportunity untested in an academic marketing course.

Thus, the marketing course formed teams of marketing students who identified products or services available on the Academy--the grocery store, barber and beauty shops, the student union, athletic events, etc. Marketing campaigns were planned with base line "sales" figures established, the commerical developed on a story board, and subsequent measures taken to identify the effect on sales of the commercial. Cadets had to focus on clearly identifying the product or service itself, defining the target market (who will be affected), and then creating a visual, aural, hard-hitting attention to action message--all wrapped up in a 30-second commercial!

Working on real projects stimulated the students to think. Innovative ideas are rewarded--it doesn't matter whether the commercial "worked" so long as the students understood what happened and why. The result is that some of the spot commercials are better than those shown on local television.

Since half the distribution management students worked on the commercials, we were able to compare their performance with fellow students who did not have that experience. The Blue Tube students did not do any better (or any worse) than the others on objective and essay examinations. However, the Blue Tube students were significantly higher in their

satisfaction with the course, had more confidence in their capacity to apply marketing concepts, and reflective of their abilitlies to actually evaluate the material studied. A follow-on study will focus on the possible long-range effects of the learning process.

In its first year, the Blue Tube course package won first prize for television general broadcasting in intercollegiate broadcast competition. The commercials took three third prizes. Our cadets say they have only begun to show their communicative powers. The program is extremely popular and provides a vast array of services to the entire Academy family. You might find yourself being highlighted on Blue Tube for an academic accomplishment, a great sporting feat, or for anything else that might attract our reporters' eyes. It's also a good way to put down rumor and gives the cadets a chance to hear about an important issue directly from a top school administrator.

But the important thing is the academic experience these cadets gain from a total communications laboratory. The English 330H students will never see television in the same way before they entered the course. They've learned to write a story, support it with visual action, and make it part of a disciplined television production. They've been in front of the camera and even run that camera. They've learned to patch together slides, tape, and film into a continuous flow of information. They've felt the applause of their audience as well as outrage for a particular editorial slant. They've learned to write spoken communication, and they've also been forced into the more disciplined mode of communicating in a

technical report. Working together as a team, they've gained a firmer insight into the working relationship between NCO's and officers.

The Management 475 students have had the thrill of watching an audience respond to a carefully tailored commercial message. Instead of talking about the theory of advertising, they've been able to put theory into practice. They went out and found a customer, analyzed his needs, and then targeted the customer's services to a specific audience. They also gained an appreciation of how communicative skills impact nearly every aspect of their management studies. What could be more real life? What can teach commercial advertising better than the actual process of writing, filming, and airing a commercial? From A to Z, it's the best kind of training.

We're very happy that we met in the hardware store on that Saturday. The English professor never did fix his leaking faucet, and the Management professor still has half of his woodworking project to complete. But the Blue Tube package is together and working smoothly. It's a superb example of how two disciplines can join together to produce a total educational package. That Blue Tube will remain a vital part of the communication and management training here at the Academy is a foregone conclusion.